GOMPERS WRITES ON BRITISH TRADE UNIONS

The Annual British Trade Union Congress. The Drift of Trade Union Effort in England

(Copyright, 1909, by P. S. Ridsdale for Samuel Gompers.)

Ipswich, Eng., Sept. 11, 1909.

The purpose of the annual British Trade Union Congress, which has just come to a close, is to decide upon the labor measures its Parliamentary Committee shall recommend to the national lawmakers. Many of the subjects introduced at the conventions of the American Federation of Labor—trade jurisdictions, boycotts, lockouts, strikes, dealings between particular unions and employers—do not come up for consideration in the Congress, and consequently the number of resolutions presented are hardly half as many as are discussed in the annual American Federation of Labor conventions. The place of holding the Congress changes from year to year, in order to impart to all parts of the country successively the quickening impulse that comes to a locality with the publicity and interest connected with the event. Ipswich, with 66,000 inhabitants, not a very lively town from the English point of view, was chosen for this year's Congress for the reason that no such meeting had been held in Central East England since 1894, when one took place at Norwich.

Present at the Public Hall sessions this week in Ipswich were 495 delegates, representing unions with a membership of 1,701,000. Chairman D. J. Shackleton, of the Parliamentary Committee, acting as President of the Congress, mentioned that among the delegates were 23 Members of Parliament, 26 Justices of the Peace, one Mayor, six Aldermen, and 18 Councillors. The number of different unions represented was 195, most of them having but one delegate, but at the other extreme was the Miners' Federation with 17, and the weavers with 49. There were four women delegates. Fraternal delegates were also present from the Labor Party (J. Kier Hardie) the Co-operative Union, the Board of Trade, the General Federation of Trade Unions, and the American Federation of Labor (B. A. Larger and John P. Frey, with Samuel Gompers as a special representative this year.)

The resolutions to be voted on at the Congress, with their amendments, must be in the hands of the Parliamentary Committee a stated time previous to the date of the meeting. Being then printed in the "agenda," they are published a sufficient time before the week of the debates on them to permit each delegate and his constituents to know what is awaiting the expression of their will. The resolutions, which are not referred to committees at the Congress, are usually of a type familiar to all who are in the trade union movement. Some, like that on compulsory arbitration, brought up year after year by their champions, are sure to meet certain defeat. Others, like that on secular education, encountering strenuous opposition from denominational sources, are passed by large majorities. As in many other deliberative bodies, the debate is carried on by a comparatively small body of recognized spokesmen for the various elements present. Monday, with the opening session was taken up with preliminary formalities, and Saturday with resolutions of courtesy; hence, the real business was gone over in four days, a five minute speech rule being adopted the third day.

The drift of British trade union effort is to be seen in the decisions on certain of the resolutions. The longest debate on Thursday was on a motion embodying an "emphatic condemnation of any indirect or direct compulsory enlistment of the working classes into the Territorial forces," and also condemning "the regulations which permit these forces to be used in suppressing trade disputes" This was passed, but an amendment calling for "a citizen army free from military law in times of peace"—the German Socialist conception of a military organization as a substitute for the standing army—was rejected, 933,000 votes to 102,000. A resolution calling upon the Government to appoint a Minister of Labor with full cabinet rank was passed. A resolution to establish a Labor daily newspaper in London, for which $750,000 would be needed, was voted down. A resolution was passed calling upon the organized workers "to fall into line with their comrades of other countries to demonstrate on Labor Day in order to demand the institution of a legal eight-hour day, and to maintain the interests of the working class generally in the cause of universal peace, by the suspension of work on May 1." Prison commissioners were denounced for putting the work of prisoners on the open market in direct competition with the work of law-abiding citizens." The government was asked to prevent the exportation of "blacklegs" to foreign countries in time of industrial disputes. The label of the Amalgamated Society of Tailors and Tailoresses was indorsed. As heretofore, only the British hatmakers have had a label, this move may mean the promotion of the trade union label in the Kingdom on a large scale. The neglect of this weapon in Great Britain by the trade unionists has for years been commented upon by American unionists. Both the government's scheme for labor exchanges and the proposition for insurance against unemployment were approved. The government was appealed to in the matter of evictions by landlord employers during labor disputes. A measure was proposed by which the Government should "consider the propriety of making 'grants-in-aid' to trade organizations supporting their members during periods of sickness by the payment of out-of-work benefit." This was rejected by a small majority, the principal argument against it being that the scheme would hamper trade union activities and could not be dove-tailed into union administration. The Congress strongly

Samuel Gompers.

condemned "the provisions of the American copyright acts whereby copyright is refused to any British publication unless the type is actually set up and the whole of the plates are produced in America," thereby "crippling the printing and paper industry" of Great Britain. The Government was asked to reduce the old age pension limit to 60 years, with the abolition of disqualifications contained in the present act. The confiscation of copies of "Justice," a Socialist paper, at the recent anti-Czar demonstration at Trafalgar Square, was protested against, and also the prohibition of circulating the paper in India. These acts were regarded as "an attack on the freedom of the press more characteristic of Russian despotism than the government of a professedly democratic country." A resolution was accepted demanding "electoral reform," contained these among other items: "The payment of members of Parliament by the State; the holding of all general elections on one and the same day; a more equitable destribution of seats; the abolition of plural voting representation; the extension of the franchise to all adults, male and female." Proportional representation was voted down by a large majority. Several resolutions on industrial insurance, which were passed, brought out a forcible presentation of the evils of the system as operated in England. One of the resolutions read: "Having regard to the serious nature of the illegal practices connected with industrial insurance, which have led to wide spread gambling in human lives, this Congress calls upon his Majesty's Government to institute an inquiry by means of a Royal Commission, or a committee with a view to legislation to prohibit such illegal practices." The resolution favoring compulsory, which was lost by an overwhelming majority, began: "That this Congress, recognizing the futility and wastefulness of the strike as a means of settling trade disputes, hereby affirms the principal of conciliation and arbitration in all such disputes, and is of the opinion that the time has arrived in the direction of conferring compulsory powers on the Board of Trade to inquire into any industrial disputes when requested by either party. Pending such inquiry and report no strike or lock-out shall take place." The present government's budget land clauses were approved as "being in harmony with the expressed policy of former Congresses and in accord with the just claims of labor for the taxation of unearned increment and land monopoly and placing the burden according to the ability to pay." A resolution supporting the eight-hour day was mingled in the debate with one "recognizing that unemployment is now permanent in character, in busy as in slack seasons, in summer and in winter, and is common to all trades and industries, consequent upon industry being carried on for private profit," etc.

Flashlight glimpses of the condition of labor in 1909 may be caught in reading statements made by delegates at the Congress, usually in the course of speeches on measures affecting their own occupations. Richard Bell, M. P., General Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, said that when his union had asked the Great Eastern Railway directors for an eight-hour day and an increase of two shillings per week in wages, petitions were sent to the company by a large number of unorganized men, earning 17 shilings a week ($4.25), repudiating the demands of the union. The President of the Congress, referring in his annual address to the Government's land-tax item in the budget, wrote: "The cry of the landlords—that in order to live their lives of pleasure and luxury it will be necessary for them to curtail their expenditure on charitable objects—is one which needs only to be stated to be resented by the people of this country." C. W. Bowerman, M. P., of the printing trades, said: "A return issued by the Board of Trade not long ago gave statistics regarding the benefits paid by one hundred of the large trade unions for the past ten years, and showed that the accumulated expenditure for unemployed, superanuation, death, emigration benefits and so on, came to a little under ten million pounds" ($50,000,000). A. J. Walkden, of the Railway Clerks' Association, represented railway clerks as working in "unhealthy holes." "The worst places were in the goods departments, where night clerks had to work in places which had been occupied by a staff of day clerks. Most of the so-called offices were badly ventilated, even in the daytime." Station-masters and clerks worked Sundays without payment or equivalent time off. George Lansbury, of the London Unemployed Committee, at a public meeting, stated: "There is work for 15,000 men at the port of London, but there are no less than 25,000 competing for the positions." H. R. Elvin, of the Clerks' National Union, gave details of a "public office 25 feet square in which there were 25 clerks, male and female, constantly employed, a day and a night staff, so that the office was never empty, that it might be sweetened by fresh air. The ventilation was bad, and the only windows looked into a passage." R. Smillie, M. P., Miners' Federation, speaking on evictions, told of seeing "seven hundred families of miners turned out on the wayside in the depth of winter." At Hensworth, an employer owning 100 houses, bought of another owner a hundred or more, and then obtaining an eviction order, "turned all the people out." J. Hallsworth, Co-operative Employers, asking that co-operative societies should always pay the union scale, said: "There are societies with trade unionists on the board employing girls of 18 or 19 years of age at 2s. 6d. (62 cents) and 4s. 6d. $1.10) a week of 65 hours." W. J. Davies, supporting a resolution calling for electoral registry reform, remarked: "Last December, I left London to take up permanent residence in Nottingham, and I shall have to wait until July of next year before I shall be qualified" as a voter). T. Richards, M. P., spoke of the Labor Party as "the only party in the House of Commons the majority of which are total abstainers." W. F. Dawtry, General Secretary of the Steam Engine Makers' Society, 13,000 members with a bank balance of $425,000, at a dinner, spoke of preferring "that a trade union congress should deal more with direct trade union questions. To his mind there was a tendency for a sort of rivalry between trade unionism and politicians." One like himself hardly knew which side to take. H. Smith, Barnsley miners, supporting better mine regulations, said: "In 1908, fatal in mines (in Great Britain) caused 1,308 deaths, while non-fatal accidents kept 141,851 men incapacitated more than seven days." W. Ross, Paper Mill Workers, stated that for a quarter of a million factories and workshops there were only 200 government inspectors. Councillor Webster, Bleachers, said that some dye-works had not received visits from inspectors for twenty years. S. March, London Carmen's Union, advocating licensing all carmen in London, quoted street accident statistics. "In 1891, accidents in the streets of London were 5,500, but with the introduction of motor traffic it rose to 11,800 in 1905, to 14,000 in 1906, and to 17,000 in 1908. It is surprising that the public has not protested against the excessive speed with which motor vehicles are driven and the incompetency of motor drivers." A. Smith, London Cab Drivers, said that motor drivers received 25 per cent. on every pound sterling they earned, but they had to pay for their petroleum, which was often wasted through leaking cars. It often happend that after a 15-hour day, two shillings was all that a driver had to take. G. T. Jackson, Tram and Vehicle Workers, gave an instance of street car service, in which a man lost his situation through an accident which happened at 10:45 at night, after he had only to his credit a 10-hour day, though he had begun his work at 6 o'clock in the morning. A resolution was passed advocating minimum wages—which means the wages of the mass of workers in the danger buildings of manufactories for explosives at Woolwich Arsenal, thirty-six shillings for a 48-hour week was recommended. In American money the scale fixed upon as a goal to be aimed at would yield $7.50 to $9 a week. Davis, Municipal Employers, wanted a recognized minimum wage in all industries, essential to the welfare of the nation." "In Ipswich, the minimum wage fixed by the trade union for building laborers was 5d. per hour, but a larger number worked for 1-2d., 4d. and 4 1-2d." A ten-hour day would therefore yield these laborers from 70 to 90 cents.

Mr. George Edwards, the Norfolk Agricultural Laborers' delegate, made known to the Congress some of the possibilities arising from the new labor organization that was spreading among his class. Although it had been begun only in 1907, there were already 150 branches with 7,000 members. He said that the delegates coming from the large centers of industry had no idea of the seriousness of the questions bearing on employment, and especially eviction, from the standpoint of the agricultural laborers. A town worker when evicted might find a shelter in the next street, but a farm laborer could not get one in the same village nor in any of half a dozen near him. From a form of agreement in his hand, he read the terms to which a laborer he represented had had to submit. By these, the man agreed to give up his cottage at a week's notice; not to keep pigs or fowls without the landlord's permission; to act as night watchman when required; to inform on poachers"; not to harbor any one of his family "who might misconduct themselves in any way"; not to remove certain of his utensils until the landlord or the agent refused to purchase them; to undertake to live at peace with his neighbors and to lead an honest and respectable life; to obtain permission from the landlord or agent before admitting to his home any of his family; "giving particulars on a form provided by the landlord, their names and ages, and also if married or single, and how long they want to stay. Laborers who lived under such conditions as he described could neither make application for an allotment of land under the act of Parliament nor serve on local boards. If they tried to do such things, they were marked men and turned out of their cottages. Mr. Edwards said his organization had been encouraged by an increase of one shilling a week in consequence of its efforts. Wages were usually 12 shillings a week ($3). His union's dues were 2d. a week (4 cents). Mr. Edwards is an interesting personality. Born in 1850, he has been at work as a laborer all his life since six years of age; he never attended a school; once worked with Joseph Arch; is a member of the County Council of Norfolk. He was regarded with interest in the convention.

In the course of the week at Ipswich, the occasion was taken to hold meetings by a number of organizations associated to a greater or less extent with the British labor movement. Two mass-meetings were held in the Hippodrome on Sunday, one in the afternoon by the Independent Labor Party, which was attended by 1,900 persons, according to the local press, and the second in the evening by the National Union of Gas Workers and General Laborers, when the audience numbered 1,600. At the afternoon meeting, the speeches, purely Socialistic in character, were made by Kier Hardie, George H. Roberts, and Fred Henderson. Mr. Roberts, who is the Parliamentary whip of the Labor Party, said he was "visiting Ipswich in the dual capacity of a trade union official, and a rank-and-filer of the Labor party." He said: "The total number of wage-workers eligible to become members of trade unions is about 14,000,000 in Great Britain and Ireland, and out of that number some 2,000,000 belong to trade unions." "Not within the recollection of any one present have we seen such crowded years of labor and Socialistic legislation as the past three or four years have been." "There are 34 Labor members in the House of Commons today, but as sure as I speak to you, there will be 65 or 70 in the next House of Commons."

At the evening meeting, the salient feature was the Countess of Warwick presiding. On the Saturday previous new headquarters were opened in Ipswich by the local branch of the Labor Party; two meetings were held, that of the evening being addressed by three M. P.'s attending the Congress as trade unionists—Pete Curran, J. Seddon, and G. H. Roberts.

In the churches of Ipswich, Sunday sermons were delivered having reference to the Congress. Rev. John Gibson, speaking in St. Nicholas Congregational church, welcoming the delegates, said: "There has been a great departure of the masses of the people of this country from the organized churches of Christendom. In London out of a population of seven millions nearly six milions seldom attend a place of worship; and it is much the same in other towns. Various causes had been assigned for this—religious indifference, unbelief, the physical and mental exhaustion of the multitude, pew rents, snobbery in their churches

(Continued on Page Fifteen.)